DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 347 CS 211 354

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TITLE	Audience Awareness: When and How Does It Develop? ERIC Digest No. 4, 1988.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	88
CONTRACT	RI888-06-2001
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Audience Analysis; *Audience Awareness; *Classroom Environment; Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; *Reading Writing Relationship; Writing Evaluation; Writing Exercises; *Writing Improvement
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Writing Assignments

ABSTRACT

A case can be made for teachers to use audience-oriented teaching strategies that encourage children to write for a wide range of readers. Even so, questions remain about how writers, especially student writers, actually learn to consider an audience of readers when they write. Research suggests that a developmental trend exists in which children gradually develop a sense of audience in their writing. Other studies suggest that teachers can develop effective audience-oriented writing strategies only if they think carefully about their own role as an audience for their students' writing. The ERIC database contains numerous ideas for assignments and strategies that (1) encourage students to write for a range of audiences; (2) provide opportunities to receive responses from these audiences; and (3) help students learn the value of writing as a process of communication. (MS)

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ERIC DIGEST ■ Number 4, 1988

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Audience awareness: when and how does it develop?

by Rebecca L. Strange

Many theorists contend that the purpose of writing is to communicate with an audience, which can be defined as actual readers or as the writer himself. Scholars also seem to agree on another point: "no matter who/what the audience is (from real people to fictional construct), writers adjust their discourse to their audiences. In other words, writers do things to bring their readers into their texts, to establish a community that includes themselves and their reader." (Wildeman, 1988)

A strong case can be made for teachers to use audience-oriented teaching strategies that encourage children to write for a wide range of readers. Examples of such assignments would be to have the student write letters or something that would be read by parents, friends, local community leaders, or sports heroes.

Yet questions remain about how writers, especially student writers, actually learn to consider an audience of readers. These questions involve complex issues that are current topics of investigation.

Young children's sense of audience

Can teachers expect students as young as those in elementary school to write with an audience in mind? Research suggests that a developmental trend exists in which children gradually develop a sense of audience in their writing.

Young children apparently understand that they can use writing to communicate with a reader, and they intend to write in a manner that demonstrates this understanding. Kroll (1984) found that nine-year-old children wrote letters in which clear problem statements and explicit requests for help indicated audience awareness. "Few of the letters manifested either gross egocentrism or a blatant disregard for the reader's needs." (p.425) Yet the nine year olds frequently did not provide essential information about themselves or instructions so the reader could respond to the letter.

The high school writers in a study by Fontaine (1984) were more apt than elementary students to adjust writing to meet audience needs. Eighteen-year-old students and nine year olds were asked to write letters to a good friend (a familiar peer audience) and to a great aunt from France (an unfamiliar adult audience).

Fontaine found that eighteen-year-old writers reflected on audience while they were writing and during stimulated recall and interview discussions after their letters were written. In contrast, the nine year olds reflected on audience during stimulated recall and interview discussions but seldom as they were writing. Fontaine suggests that while "young writers have a developing awareness of audience—one which allows them to describe rationally the audience/writer relationship....the nine-year-olds seemed to be trapped, having neither a real nor a representational image of the audience, but only an ill-defined sense of the 'other.'" (p.19-20)

A study of sixth-grade writers (Strange, 1986) provides additional evidence that children understand that audiences differ. Students wrote movie reviews for two audiences—one consisting of the writer himself or a friend and the other of a teacher or a university professor. Students significantly altered two of the four variables studied according to the audience. They decreased the percentage of slang expressions and increased the number of words when they wrote for the teacher or university professor. In contrast, the students increased the percentage of slang expressions and decreased the number of words when they wrote for a friend or self. Students also appeared to write in a more deferential fashion for a teacher or a professor, including apologies for opinions and hedging on their opinions more.

These studies suggest that teachers can expect young students to understand that writing should be adapted to readers' needs. Moreover, teachers can expect elementary students to make limited adjustments in their writing according to audience. More specifically, research suggests that elementary students can write clear problem statements for readers and choose appropriate wording for readers. High school students appear to be much more likely to consider audience needs throughout the writing process than are elementary students.

The classroom environment

How does a teacher affect students' sense of audience? Studies suggest that teachers can develop effective audience-oriented writing strategies only if they think carefully about their own role as an audience for their students' writing. Not only does the teacher control the classroom environment and devise writing assignments and strategies, but the teacher usually reads and evaluates the writing. Especially confusing to students is knowing that the teacher is also the audience of writing assignments that prescribe other audiences.

It is not surprising that Britton (1975) found that the audience that students most frequently addressed in a school environment was the teacher. After accumulating almost 2,000 writing samples from British students comparable to fifth graders and above in American schools, Britton categorized the writing samples as addressing oneself, the teacher, a wider audience, or an unknown audience. A large majority of the scripts, 85 percent, were written for the teacher or the teacher as the examiner.

Yet outside the classroom, people write for a variety of audiences. In Marion, Ohio, adult writers were observed as they wrote in settings including a school office, restaurants, a travel agency, and a health club (Sanders, 1985). Analysis of self-report forms, interviews, and writing samples showed that the participants wrote with purposes and for audiences ranging from the private ("I wrote for myself in order to cap-

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ture the feelings I was having") to the public, as in writing notices for church bulletins.

Trained observers in a study by Marshall (1983) discussed with high school students their school writing tasks. The students felt they had few available options when they wrote for school. They shaped their writing according to a narrow range of purposes and audiences. When writing for teacher as audience, the students appeared to distance themselves from the writing task, focusing on surface details, such as "nice sounding" words and sentences they thought would meet teacher expectations. One student said about his composition, "...it had a lot of information, which is what...[the teacher] wanted." Marshall states, "One can hypothesize that the effect of a judgmental audience for student writing would be to displace student interest in the task itself with an interest in the teacher's response to the finished product." (p. 17)

It is unlikely that teachers can or should abandon the practice of evaluating class writing assignments. Teachers, however, who rely extensively on assignments and strategies that focus on teacher as audience are likely to train students to write safe compositions that they think teachers will accept. Such compositions may be formally correct but do not interest or engage the student completely in the writing process; nor do they reflect the realities of writing tasks outside the classroom.

Classroom strategies

The ERIC database contains numerous ideas for assignments and strategies that encourage students to write for a range of audiences and that provide opportunities to receive responses from these audiences (*e.g.*, see themed issues of *The Leaflet*, 1985 and the *Connecticut English Journal*, 1983).

Students of all ages can write letters to real readers. Students can participate in "letter exchanges" in which they write and exchange letters with other students (Melerski, 1983). Teachers can also exchange letters and notes with students. In another variation, students write letters with the same information to different readers and adjust the text of each letter according to audience.

Another good way to help students write for different audiences is to publish children's writing. Hubbard (1985) found that publishing had beneficial results for second graders' perceptions of audience. In her study, students who published their writing viewed the readers' reactions as important and helpful. "When people read my book it's like they help me. When they read it, I get more ideas for another story." (p.660)

Publishing takes many forms, some more appropriate for older students than for younger students. Young students frequently appreciate seeing their writing displayed on a bulletin board in the classroom or bound into a book and placed in the library. Older students in middle school and high school are more likely to appreciate compositions and stories printed in school newsletters and literary journals or even in commercial magazines. As long as their writing is read by a wide audience, students will consider their work published; and they will be more apt to consider audience as they write.

When teachers develop assignments and strategies that sharpen students' sense of audience, the students learn the value of writing as a process of communication. Students will better understand the goal of the writer: "to find words that he hopes will communicate his intended meaning to a reader. Even the author who declares that he writes without concern for any potential reader writes 'for himself alone' – as a reader." (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 76)

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.